



## **Belarus Brief**

April 25, 2006

### **There Can Be Only One: But Who?**

1) After taking a short break, Alexander Lukashenka is back making personal changes in his government and outlining future policies and procedures by the regime. Keeping Sergei Sidorski as prime minister was not a surprise, since the regime wants to keep the image of "no policy change." Despite the rhetoric, the regime is making one "strange," unexpected step after another, showing it is trying to find breaking points from the isolation it imposed upon itself to safeguard a third term for Lukashenka. Thus it admitted a policy change after the announcement of a hike in the gas price by Gazprom on March 30, 2006.

2) On April 9, 2006 the Belarusian government submitted proposals on improving bilateral relations to the Polish Foreign Ministry. The proposal included revival of bilateral cooperation commissions, promotion of cross-border cooperation and cooperation among provinces, and cooperation on border controls and environmental protection. Moreover, the Belarusian side suggested that the bilateral Commission on Affairs of Ethnic Minority Schools should resume its activities.

3) Releasing Mikhail Marinich from the prison could be part of positive message package the regime is sending to the West. First, Marinich was sentenced to five years, and then the sentence was reduced to three years, later to two and a half years. In the end, he had served two years. Lukashenka obviously needed to keep him in prison for the elections, but also for the reason that Marinich reportedly had good connections with part of the Russian establishment, thus could be more dangerous for Lukashenka than the attempts of the opposition before the election. Marinich's place in prison is likely to be filled by Alexander Kazulin, the social democratic candidate at the 2006 presidential election.

4) On the other hand, the dismissal of Anatoly Tozik as head of the State Control Committee and his posting to Beijing as ambassador to China has finished the takeover of the inner circle (*siloviki*) of Lukashenka by Viktor Sheiman, the former prosecutor general, former head of presidential administration, and currently the head of the Security Council (Genadyj Nevyglas, the current head of presidential administration was state secretary of the Security Council of Belarus from 2001). Tozik was leading the second most important group in Lukashenka's inner circle and together with Ural Latypov, the former head of presidential administration, was believed to stand behind Alexander Kazulin. Sending him to China will diminish the possibility of counterbalancing Sheiman, thus repression against political activists is likely to grow. Most importantly, the Security Council could be the new power center, especially if Sheiman will try to gather

law enforcement and security institutions under the control of the Council. This new concentration of power could lead to the question: who is ruling Belarus currently?

5) This is especially the case, since according to Natalia Petkevich, the deputy head of the presidential administration, Lukashenka is in "perfect shape". Petkevich, who was running Lukashenka's press conferences from 2001 and recently was moved within the presidential administration to deal with clemency issues, is rumored in Minsk to be enough close to Lukashenka to know about his health conditions. Nevertheless, the fact that the administration is even reacting in the press to rumors of Lukashenka having cancer suggests that this time the administration is taking this more seriously.

6) Another project to attract foreign funding seems to be outlined in increasing economic cooperation with Iran – at least according Lukashenka's hope, as he recently met in Minsk with the head of the Belarus-Iran Commission for Economic Cooperation, the Iranian Minister of Commerce Masud Mir-Kazemi. The form of this economic cooperation has been mainly road-construction equipment and petrochemical products. Commerce talks in Minsk reportedly focused on delivering MAZ truck kits to an assembly plant in Iran and an assembly facility for MTZ tractors. However, some observers suggest that Belarus might be a "broker" on a weapons deal between Russia and Iran, especially the four S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, one of which already arrived in Minsk on April 21, 2006. Obviously, Belarus faces no military threat, but the re-export, suggested by *Jane's Intelligence Digest* a few weeks ago, could increase the most needed income in the so-called presidential fund, the biggest secret in Belarus.

### **Evaluating Election Results: Polling or Not Polling?**

7) The Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (IISEPS) presented its April results and challenged the opinion of many analysts with its findings regarding the elections results. According to 1,500 respondents polled from March 27 to April 6, Lukashenka was backed by 63.6% of voters in the March 19 presidential elections, while opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich received 20.6% of the vote. Both international and domestic experts have been discussing with increasing emotion how such surveys could produce valid results in the current conditions in Belarus. While the 2004 exit poll showing that Lukashenka did not reach the threshold for running third time, executed by the Vilnius-based Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys was one of the most successful project by international organizations working on democratization of Belarus, this time the international community was not prepared for the failure of a similar effort.

8) The fact is that the independent exit poll was marred by the regime this time, and that it will be very hard, therefore, to measure Lukashenka's rating from now on. Although according to IISEPS the authorities always underestimate while the opposition overestimates the readiness of Belarusian society for change, Oleg Manaev's group failed to provide more interpretation for its findings. One possible answer is the increased fear factor and the countermeasures by the authorities against independent pollsters. Based on other non-quantitative indicators, it is hard to believe Lukashenka would have received 63.6% of the votes. There is nothing wrong if IISEPS keeps its mission to inform the public about the state of Belarusian society, however, necessary interpretation should be added.

9) Pontis Foundation believes it is pointless to discuss whether he received 63% or not. The bottom line is that Belarus has had no experience of free and fair elections in the past twelve years, and there was almost a total absence of an alternative over the past five years. Thus voters get used to voting for the dictator, because they – still - accept the current rules of the election in Belarus: the public ritual to show that there can be only one ruler.

## **Visa Ban: All Politics is Personal**

10) The freshly introduced visa restrictions by the European Union on top Belarusian officials considered responsible for the fraudulent elections are already bearing fruit in terms of embarrassment of those on the list and reaction of political circles in Belarus, but also in Russia. Perhaps the biggest incident was caused by Canada's refusal to allow Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorski's plane to land for refueling en route to Cuba last Thursday due to the fact that two people person were on board who are on the EU visa ban list. "The United States is friendlier than Canada," commented a Belarusian diplomat after the plane was finally allowed to make re-fuelling stop in Boston. The "love affair" was rather short: US authorities refused to grant permission for landing for the plane on its return, after the Belarus delegation decided to shorten the trip and changed the schedule agreed in advance. The Belarusian was forced to fly to Minsk through Barbados and the Canary Islands.

11) During the first days of visa ban there were four other officials on the list who were refused a visa or had a visa revoked. Moreover, the French Embassy refused to give visa to Spain for Yuri Azaronak, the Belarusian TV's notorious commentator. There is no wonder the visa ban provided more reaction than any other EU policy so far including "immoral" (former Russian Duma Speaker Seleznev), "childish" (Belarusian diplomat serving in Havana), while the EU was portrayed as "there is nothing to see except tiled roofs" (Belarusian MP Kostyan), and "has too many problems to want to create new ones (Lukashenka). Based on these reports, the visa ban seems to be a serious challenge to the status quo on an individual basis, which is necessary in a society where all politics is personal.

## **Democratic Forces: In Search of a New Strategy**

12) The by-far most active human rights organization in Belarus, Viasna came up with its monitoring results on still active criminal cases that have been recently brought against political activists in Belarus. The summary is the following: 1 person sentenced to 5 months of arrest, 21 are under investigation, 8 are in jail.<sup>1</sup>

13) Despite the authorities clearly targeting of young activists, the immediate post-election period has boosted youth activism in particular. In the aftermath of the tent city, flash mobilization actions appear almost every day in Minsk and some limited places in the regions. These actions suggest that those left from various (youth) movements after 2001 are coming back and with even younger newcomers are looking to do something new. While Minsk is "action-based," the regions lag seriously behind.

14) While Alexander Milinkevich is keeping a busy travel schedule all over Europe, beside the Chernobyl March the question of leadership (rather unexpectedly) and the question of

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<sup>1</sup> This monitoring contains information about the criminal cases that were brought for political motives during the presidential electoral campaign in Belarus in 2006. The electoral campaign was defined by rapid growth in the number of criminal cases against activists of civil society, opposition parties, and non-governmental organizations. Persons facing criminal charges are the following: Aliaksandr Kazakou and Dzmitry Zubro (activists of the Zubr movement, for political graffiti), Pavel Krasouski (member of the initiative group of Aliaksandr Milinkevich), Dzmitry Kaspiarovich (activist of the BPF Party, on charges of defamation of state symbols), Artur Finkevich (activist of the youth organization Young Front, for political graffiti), Uladzimir Khomichau and Maksim Kokarau (activists of the Young Front, for political graffiti), Siarhei Biazmen and Siarhei Lashkevich, Aliaksandr Kazulin (candidate in the presidential election), Mikalai Astreika, Enira Branitskaia, Tsimafei Dranchuk and Aliaksandr Shalaika (activists of the NGO Partnership), Iauhen Suvorau, Anastasia Azarka, Iury Radzivil (drivers of presidential candidate Aliaksandr Kazulin), Ivan Kruk (activist of the United Civil Party), Tatsiana Protska (chair of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee), Andrei Panasik (public activist of the town of Masty), and Edvard Zeliankou (activist of the Young Front).

the new movement (expectedly) is challenging the democratic forces. Some domestic analysts warn that behind the scenes disputes between the United Civic Party (UCP) and the Belarusian Popular Front, the two strongest parties of the democratic forces, seems renewing. UCP certainly could think that BNF with Milinkevich (whose candidacy was supported originally by BNF) became too strong. As matter of fact, Anatolij Lebedko, the Chairman of UCP in an interview with *Radio Svaboda* on March 13 said that "decisions adopted by Congress of Democratic Forces were for the electoral campaign." "There is a new situation, since many new people at the Belarusian Maidan do not know the names of opposition politicians," argued Lebedko. Nevertheless, he is for a "single strategy of change," but with different priorities and accents.

15) At the same time, the first memorandum for the movement announced by Milinkevich on Freedom Day (March 25, 2006) was prepared by NGO activists. This shows the more partnership based relations between political parties and NGOs after the election, but also indicates a lack of organized human resources in the political parties. Especially since an umbrella NGO was unofficially asked to run the movement for the democratic coalition. Nevertheless, the "success" of the elections caught the majority of the "organized" opposition off-guard, while new initiatives without structures flourish. The real task of the organized opposition now is to learn to be flexible and seize the window of opportunity given, which isn't going to stay open long.

16) The strength of the newly empowered civil society could be seen at the Chernobyl March on April 26. Despite there being no sign of serious organizational effort by the opposition, thousands are reportedly preparing to take part. Democratic forces must deliver and articulate a new program soon, otherwise the momentum and the positive atmosphere within civil society could soon dissipate.